

Training



great teachers



By Dr Lawrence Ingvarson

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Teacher education is high on the political agenda in Australia, with several government inquiries on the topic currently underway. These inquiries reflect, in part, dissatisfaction among many school principals with the preparedness of graduates.

Dr Lawrence Ingvarson asks how well new teachers feel they have been prepared for their vital role.

A recent survey asked teachers about how well their teacher education had prepared them for the demands of teaching. ACER surveyed the teachers at the start of their second year of teaching for the Victorian Institute of Teaching in 2004. Teachers who completed a four-year undergraduate course generally reported more favourably on their course than teachers who completed a post-graduate degree. On a four point scale, teachers generally rated their courses slightly below a three, except in the area of working with and reporting to parents, which scored near a two on average.

School experience was rated higher than other elements of teacher education programs, but teachers from most courses made frequent mention of unsatisfactory arrangements, including the selection and preparation of teachers supervising the practicum experience in schools.

Most universities are having difficulty in finding schools and teachers who are able and willing to provide quality practicum experiences for their students, and in ensuring that those experiences link productively with the theoretical components of their courses.

Differences in practicum arrangements were not related to the reported effectiveness of teacher education programs. This is not to say that the practicum is unimportant—rather it appears that links are generally poor between the practicum and what students are learning in the university



component of the course. It is hard for universities to find supervising teachers with the training to be an effective student-teacher supervisor in a school.

There were three main features of teacher education programs that were associated with the preparedness of teachers:

A strong focus on the ‘content to be taught’

Courses with a strong content focus enabled future teachers to:

- gain a deep understanding of the content knowledge they were expected to teach;
- make clear links between content or subject matter units and units about how to teach the content;
- make clear links between theoretical and practical aspects of teaching;
- develop a sound understanding of how students learn the specific content that they were expected to teach;
- learn how to probe students’ prior understandings of content they were about to teach;
- learn how to present content in ways that built on students’ existing understanding; and
- learn methods of teaching specific to the content they were expected to teach.

Assessment and curriculum planning

Opportunity to learn ‘*how to assess student learning and plan curriculum units*’ was also strongly associated with preparedness in the areas of professional knowledge and knowledge of students in the first year of teaching. However, less than 20 per cent of teachers said their courses had prepared them, to a major extent, in this area.

Feedback

Opportunity to *receive feedback* was also significantly related to the reported effectiveness of courses. Students in the most highly rated courses were much more likely to mention the opportunities they had had for gaining timely and useful feedback from lecturers and practicing teachers as helpful features. Feedback on practice has long been recognised as a vital requirement for professional learning but teachers reported receiving little feedback from university staff as they were learning to teach. One of the key elements in linking theory to practice is feedback.

Current levels of funding for teacher education do not make it easy for university staff to provide feedback to students about their developing practice. However, the low level of feedback about practice may point to a significant weakness in current approaches to teacher education.

Teachers who reported that they felt well prepared had completed courses that gave them deep knowledge of what they were expected to help students learn, and how students learned it, as well as skill in diagnosing students’ existing levels of understanding of the content to be taught, planning activities that would promote further development and assessing the extent to which development had taken place.

These professional capabilities appear to remain the necessary, though not sufficient, foundations in preparing teachers to meet the wider demands of the job, from establishing a productive learning environment to working effectively with parents.

The findings of this study do not provide support for those who think that making teacher education “practical” and “school-based” is the answer. Teacher education programs that might be highly “practical”, in the sense of giving heavy emphasis to skills in classroom management for example, will not make up for a deficiency in the aspects of content knowledge identified in this study.

A national approach

Unlike other professions, teacher education has relatively weak forms of external assessment and accreditation by professional bodies at the state level. There is no equivalent of the Australian Medical Council, a national body that assesses and accredits initial medical training courses using visitation panels made up of experts in medical education and medical practice and ensures cross-fertilisation of ideas across states. Nor is there any equivalent to the Teacher Training Agency in England with its capacity to adjust funding to providers on the basis of their capacity to prepare teachers well.

However, now that each state has a statutory authority responsible for teacher registration we are much closer to the situation that applied in medicine in 1985 where the state governments and medical boards agreed to establish the Australian Medical Council. The newly established National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership would appear to be a suitable body to take up a parallel role in the field of education.



Teacher education research and evaluation

ACER is currently involved in other projects focused on teacher education. ACER conducted an evaluation of the Bachelor of Learning Management at Central Queensland University (CQU) in 2005. The Bachelor of Learning Management is a four year initial teaching degree which aims to prepare “workplace ready” and “futures-oriented” graduates who have a strong sense of social and educational vision, responsibility and change. The course aims to better prepare teachers for the needs of contemporary schools and to address the challenges of learning in a knowledge-based economy at a time of rapid and substantial social change.

The results of this evaluation also emphasised the importance of a strong focus on content and content-specific pedagogy. It was noted that the Bachelor of Learning Management is one of the few courses that has a unit of study titled “Teaching Reading”.

The evaluation found that teacher education courses need to make explicit the fundamental principles of sound pedagogy and the methods they will use to ensure future teachers will learn to implement them.

In addition, the preparation of teachers should be genuinely based on a partnership between the profession, employers and the universities, one that is reflected both in decision making and allocation of funding for teacher education.

ACER is also advising the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership on the development of a national system for

the accreditation of pre-service teacher education programs. The project will be completed in December 2005.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Teacher Education Study (TEDS) study began in September 2005 and will compare policy, practices and outcomes of programs for preparing teachers of mathematics in up to 30 countries. The study, which may continue for up to three years, will be jointly managed by ACER and Michigan State University (MSU), in collaboration with Data Processing Centre, Hamburg. It is hoped that Australia will participate.

The current parliamentary Inquiry into Teacher Education covers the scope, suitability, organisation, resourcing and delivery of teacher training courses in Australia's public and private universities. The inquiry is also to examine the preparedness of graduates to meet the current and future demands of teaching in Australia's schools. The issue of teacher education is clearly one of great importance, and is currently receiving a lot of attention in various research and evaluation studies. There will undoubtedly be further discussion when the Inquiry into Teacher Education concludes. ■

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